

**“Snow Disasters for Local, State and Federal
Governments in the National Capital Region:
Response and Recovery Partnerships with FEMA”**

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings,
and Emergency Management**

The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton
Chairwoman

The Honorable Mario Diaz-Balart
Ranking Member



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Good afternoon Chairwoman Norton, Ranking Member Diaz-Balart and members of the Subcommittee. My name is Millicent D. Williams and I am the Director of the District of Columbia's Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency (HSEMA). I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony about the District of Columbia's response to and recovery from this season's historic snow storms and the way in which local governments work with FEMA during periods of disaster, regardless of cause.

Specifically, the Subcommittee's request for testimony asked that my colleagues and I address the following: 1) Action that has been, or could be, taken by FEMA and the affected jurisdictions, and any response and recovery funds for which the jurisdictions may qualify; 2) How FEMA and other agencies and jurisdictions in the National Capital Region might be expected to prepare for and respond to future disasters, whether another snowstorm, hurricane, pandemic, or terrorist incident; and 3) The means by which the federal government and the National Capital Region can work together as partners with FEMA. I applaud the Subcommittee for holding a hearing to address these critical issues and thank the Subcommittee for its continued support of the District of Columbia and the National Capital Region.

I am pleased to report that despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the historic snow storms this winter, the District of Columbia and our regional partners in the National Capital Region, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency, worked in a coordinated and collaborative manner to meet the needs of our citizens. Successful collaboration allowed us to be both resilient and responsive and I believe this helped us achieve our primary goal which is to protect the safety and welfare of our citizens.

The District of Columbia government demonstrated its resilience in the face of challenging conditions by being open for business for all but two days during the December and February storms. In fact, the District government never fully closed, as we required essential personnel to report throughout the duration of the storm. Mayor Adrian M. Fenty set an early goal and communicated it throughout the winter storms – unless there was a risk to the lives and health of District employees and residents, the District government would continue to operate.

As the seat of the Federal Government, the District has a unique responsibility to remain operational to ensure the success of all entities that call the District home. Accomplishing this goal is no easy task and I would like to take a brief moment to acknowledge the hard working men and women who worked tirelessly throughout the storms to ensure the continued operations of government in the District of Columbia.

The District was successful in meeting the challenges posed by this winter's storms for several reasons but today I would like to focus on three in particular: 1) strong leadership; 2) effective

regional coordination and cooperation; and 3) the innovative use of technology for communication.

There is no substitute for strong leadership during emergency situations and Mayor Fenty demonstrated that principle during the recent snow storms. The Mayor made clear his goal that the District would be open for business and function as normally as possible during the snow events and supported the accomplishment of that goal with concrete resources, directing each District agency to do whatever it took to get the job done. The Mayor's clear direction led to strong coordination between the District, our partners in the National Capital Region and the federal government.

For reasons we are all aware, the District maintains a high level of readiness for all hazards and has developed a District Response Plan (DRP) to support planning, training, and exercise efforts to maintain readiness. Among the hazards to which we devote particular attention is snow. The District has a designated leadership team that is tasked with both the planning and execution of the District's snow response.

The District's Interagency Snow Team, led by the Department of Public Works (DPW) and the District Department of Transportation (DDOT), oversees a comprehensive snow planning process year-round. The product of this effort is the District's Snow Plan. Each spring, the District holds a post-snow season conference to discuss lessons learned during the previous winter and the Snow Plan itself is reviewed and revised during the summer. During this period of time, equipment is often serviced and replaced, new innovations and technology are integrated, and by late summer, planning and training in anticipation of the impending winter is held with District partner agencies. During actual snow events, DDOT and DPW officials provide active operational management of the response from the Snow Command Center at 14th & U Streets, NW.

During this year's event, District agencies were brought together for coordination and situational awareness on regularly scheduled HSEMA conference calls, chaired by City Administrator Neil Albert or myself. These calls provided an opportunity – daily or more frequently, as necessary – to review agency needs, assess our progress in implementing the Snow Plan, the District Response Plan, and agency-specific emergency plans, and make any necessary adjustments. For example, when we determined that some elderly District residents were at risk of not receiving critical food deliveries, we were able to adjust plowing priorities and identify transportation resources to effect those deliveries.

As we all know, any incident that affects the District of Columbia is almost certain to affect our NCR partners, and vice versa. During the 2009-2010 snow events, one of the primary

coordination mechanisms was the daily Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG) Snow Call. Bringing together all of the key partners from federal, state, and local jurisdictions in the NCR proved invaluable for creating shared situational awareness and allowed for better decision making across the region.

Overall, our federal partners in the NCR have been cooperative and supportive of the District's snow response. The timeliness of notifications of federal closures by the Office of Personnel Management has improved, addressing our long-standing request for notifications of important federal actions. As a consequence, the District government has been able to work in a more coordinated manner to facilitate the safe and effective movement of the federal and private workforce.

Specifically, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Homeland Security have provided tremendous support to the District by lending staff to our effort during and after the storms. The District also appreciates the Presidential Disaster Declaration made for the December 2009 snow event and awaits a final decision regarding the February storms. These efforts represent an excellent example of the federal, state and local partnership working as it should.

The winter 2009-2010 snow events were also marked by successes in the integration of new technology and communication systems into our snow preparedness and response efforts. As a result, the District government was able to use multiple communication platforms to provide District residents with up-to-date weather and safety information.

Mayor Fenty provided frequent updates to residents by hosting press conferences each day – often several times a day – during each snow event. HSEMA – via the DC Alert system – transmitted timely messages to citizens regarding weather and road conditions, the status of government offices and schools, emergency parking restrictions, and other critical preparedness information. Over 94,000 users are registered on DC Alert, which allows the District government to disseminate critical emergency information rapidly. In addition to the DC Alert System, DDOT provided outstanding up-to-the-minute information on specific streets and traffic incidents via Twitter.

The web-based Snow Response Reporting System also delivered accurate and timely information to District residents. The Snow Response Reporting System allows users to search by address or intersection to see which streets have been plowed and salted. Animation on the map shows the progress of the plows, and integrated links to DDOT's traffic cameras allow users

to check real-time road conditions. In the period between January 29 and February 15, which included back-to-back snow storms, 40,071 users logged on to the Snow Map to track snow plows. Traffic on the site peaked on February 8 when 7,804 people used the tool, and February 11 when 7,473 people logged on.

The District also used more traditional means to communicate with its citizens. 311, the Citywide Call Center, allowed residents to contact the District at any time, and Serve DC, the Mayor's Office on Volunteerism, mobilized hundreds of volunteers who knocked on doors, initiated phone trees, and reached out to check on the elderly, homebound, and medically fragile citizens.

Despite the success of the District in meeting historically unprecedented challenges, there are areas in which we can improve. We are currently in the process of completing our second after-action analysis, which will clarify the strengths and potential weaknesses of our system of operation and allow us to make informed and necessary improvements.

I would like to conclude my testimony by expressing my appreciation to the residents, businesses, and visitors that endured the snow events in the District this winter. Though the storms posed challenges that were unprecedented in terms of their intensity and duration, we overcame these challenges as a community as a result of our preparedness efforts, flexibility in response, and plain old good neighborliness. We will complete our review of the District's response, coordinate next steps with our regional partners, and determine the best approach to ensure that we are prepared for comparable challenges – whether from snow or other hazards – in the future. This concludes my testimony and I would be happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.